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Right: Malavika Jagannathan, a Green Bay Press-Gazette reporter, at work in the newsroom. She will get to vote in a U.S. presidential election for the first time this year.

Below: Harvard Law School student Sarah Isgur at her desk at the Romney for President Headquarters in Boston in March, 2007. Many students in the United States are involved in campaigning and fundraising for political parties and candidates.



Courtesy, MALAVIKA JAGANNATHAN

Voting for the First Time

By REBECCA ZEIFMAN

An Indian American describes her excitement about casting her first ballot.

The right to vote is one of the most basic privileges in a democracy. In the United States, anyone who is an American citizen and at least 18 years old is eligible to vote.

For first-time voters, casting that inaugural ballot is a monumental occasion. It is a chance for them to exercise their constitutionally protected right and to participate in political decision making.

Malavika Jagannathan, 23, felt this enthusiasm about voting for the first time. As a reporter for the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* in Green Bay, Wisconsin, Jagannathan was frustrated with covering elections on the job but being unable to participate herself.

Jackie Haggett, a student at the University of New Hampshire, swears to a town election official that her application information is correct as she registers to vote in Durham, New Hampshire, before the 2004 elections.

Originally from Bangalore, Jagannathan moved to the United States with her family in 1995, settling in College Station, Texas. From an early age, her family stressed the importance of political participation. “My mom always said that although our passports were from a different country, you had to be an active participant in any society you are in,” Jagannathan says.

She was involved in politics long before she was eligible to vote. In high school she volunteered for the Democratic Party and the Green Party, handing out flyers and organizing voter registration drives at school. “I would set up these little booths, but I couldn’t register them [other students]

myself because I wasn’t registered to vote,” she says.

According to Jagannathan, her status as a noncitizen actually inspired her to become more involved in politics. “I knew that I wasn’t able to [vote], but I could definitely still contribute in ways other than voting,” she says. “I think that’s partially why I was pretty into politics.”

On December 14, 2006, Jagannathan became a U.S. citizen. The next day she visited the Green Bay city hall and checked the “Yes” box on the voter registration application that asks, “Are you a citizen of the United States of America?”

Even though it was almost two months until the next election, Jagannathan was eager to sign up. “I figured I’d been talking about voting for so long, the first thing I should do is register,” she says.



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Two months later, Jagannathan voted in a local primary election with a few initiatives on the ballot. “I was very excited. My polling place is a church around the corner from where I live, and it’s run by these little old ladies. I told them it was my first time to vote, and they got all excited, too,” she says.

After covering several elections as a reporter and volunteering for a political party, it was a relief to finally participate as a voter. “I had sort of built it up for a long time, and I think, especially after the November 2006 elections, when it was killing me to sit here and cover the elections and not be able to participate, it kind of fulfilled that in a little way,” she says.

Even though not all of her favored candidates won that day, Jagannathan made a vow to friends and family that she would try to vote in every subsequent election. “It just felt that I was a part of something,” she explains. “And I think not having that for a long time, I realized that having it is pretty important.”

According to Jagannathan, new citizens may value the right to vote even more than U.S.-born citizens. “I think that when you’re just sort of born with these rights, you maybe don’t think about them as much,” she says. “When you have to live without them and then you get them, it becomes a lot more important.”

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For more information:

2008 Election: Main contenders

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/5006788.stm>

Background on the New Hampshire primary

<http://www.politicallibrary.org/Current-Primary/background.aspx>

American voters

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>